

Become a Prolific Scholar

The myth persists that prolific scholars are born not made, but research suggests otherwise. Much is known about the steps you can take to become prolific—and any scholar can.

This book will show you how.

- Write daily for 15–30 minutes
- Organize around key sentences
- Solicit the right feedback from the right colleagues
- Make effective use of feedback

Praise for Publish & Flourish

What an astonishing little book! Even a gray-hair in academic life can get useful tips. The non-gray-hairs need to buy it, use it, live it. Now.

Deirdre McCloskey, author of
Economical Writing

I read your book with interest and pleasure. I think it covers a good deal of territory that few other works of its kind do, particularly the human factors of getting started, managing one's time, sharing manuscripts with others, and so on.

Joseph Williams, author of
Style: Toward Clarity and Grace

I'm very impressed with this work. I learn from it, I benefit from it, I recommend it.

Peter Elbow, author of
Writing With Power

The Author

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Every scholar can become more prolific.
What are you waiting for?



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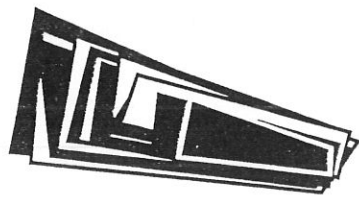
Publish & Flourish

Tara Gray

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Become a Prolific Scholar

Tara Gray (2005)



J. Revising

30 No 1

Two sections
here

1. Post your
thesis (purpose)
& write to it.

Managing Time

~~1 —
Differentiate the "urgent"
from the important~~

~~2 —
Write daily for 15-30 minutes~~

~~3 —
Record time spent writing daily—
share records weekly~~

Writing

~~4 —
Write from the first day of
your research project~~

~~5 —
Post your thesis on the wall
and write to it~~

Step 5 — Post your thesis on the wall and write to it

When you sit down to write, take a stab at describing what you are going to write about. Start with something simple, your topic, just a word or phrase even. You can develop this into a sentence later. Don't make this difficult by trying to write the perfect sentence. Just jot down something quickly. Know that this is a working thesis. You can change it at any time—you can and you should. Better theses will almost invariably arise from the writing process. Eventually, you will want to develop a thesis sentence that is short and memorable and tells your reader what is at stake, what problem you are trying to solve, what claim you are making, or what your result or conclusion is. Just assert the point; don't burden your thesis with trying to prove it, too—you have the rest of the paper to do that. Post your thesis on the wall and write to it. This expression for writers is like the expression for drivers, "Aim high in steering." Having your thesis on the wall will help you define, refine, and write to your purpose. Keep coming back to your thesis. Work back and forth between your thesis and the rest of your paper—revising first one and then the other.

Having posted your thesis on the wall, or at least your topic, consider exploring it further through free writing, free talking, outlining, or some combination. Consider using what many experts argue is the best and easiest way to get your words on paper: free writing (*Elbow 1998:13*). Free writing means writing whatever occurs to you in a stream-of-consciousness style without stopping and without self-censorship. "You can't really

Writing

draft freely and keep going unless you welcome nonsense and garbage. No treasures without garbage" (*Elbow 2005:personal correspondence*). Writers who are new to free writing start by writing for a very short time, such as three to five minutes, and work up to somewhat longer periods, such as fifteen minutes. Free writing generates momentum (*Boice 1994:96*). Ideas seem to come without struggle and some of these are both surprising and useful (*Boice 1997:28*). After you free write, you can "see" that you discovered the main points on the page. E.M. Forster put it this way, "How can I know what I think 'til I see what I say?" If you already use free writing successfully, keep it up. If you have never used free writing or not used it in a while, try it again. As a writer, you will benefit by expanding your range of skills and by having them available when you encounter challenges in your writing.

If free writing sounds strange to you, remember that it is like something you already know how to do: free talking. Sigmund Freud started working with his patients by asking them to free write, but he found free talking easier to elicit and sustain (*Boice 2000:131*). It was something they already knew how to do! As a writer, you may decide to take advantage of this. Robert Boice spent many hours watching scholars write, and he observed that the most successful, fluent scholars did not write silently. They "thought aloud," and they read sections of their prose as they wrote it and after they wrote it. As a result, when you sit down for a 15–30 minute writing segment, you may want to try free talking about your subject for a few minutes. Saying your ideas out loud before you type them up will improve your fluency and the quality of your work. Saying your words out loud after

Post your thesis on the wall

you write will also help. "Don't write entirely silently, or you will write entirely stiffly" (*McCloskey 1985:199 and 2000:30*).

Compared to free writing or free talking, you may already prefer another approach to getting your ideas on paper: outlining. Or, as you experiment more with outlining, you may come to see the advantages of outlining that others have noted (*Boice 1994:Chapter 2*). You may discover that writing an outline is just as easy as making a list and reordering it in a logical way. You may feel that writing from an outline saves the strain that comes from having to discover what you want to say while saying it (*Boice 1994:53*). One writer tried writing projects both with and without outlines and reported, "When you have done the... outlining well and imaginatively, the writing is a snap. It's really just rewriting because you don't have to struggle to find ideas, just to say them a bit more clearly" (*Boice 1997:70*). You may conclude that writing from an outline is a faster way to complete a project overall. If you already have an established habit of outlining, by all means use it.

If you don't have an established habit one way or the other, experiment with each and see which one works best for you in various stages of your writing projects. Whatever method or combination of methods you use, keep your thesis posted in plain view and work back and forth between your thesis and your prose, revising first one and then the other.

Revising

— 6 —

Organize around key sentences

— 7 —

Use key sentences as an after-the-fact outline

Revising

The problem with revision in academic writing is that there is not nearly enough of it. Editors and authors share the blame. At academic journals, editors are generally scholars who serve as volunteers. They are chosen based on their scholarly expertise with no training as editors. Naturally, many of these volunteers don't feel compelled to help authors with their writing. "The editors themselves do not edit. At the least they might reveal to the young that rotten writing causes more articles to be rejected... than rotten *t*-statistics" (*McCloskey 1985:188*).

To make matters worse, scholarly authors sometimes display a "cynical disregard" for advice—even from editors and reviewers: Authors seem to disregard advice because they believe that complicated ideas cannot be stated simply. Some academics even write turgid, impenetrable prose as a way to demonstrate the complexity of the ideas. One scholar, Denis Dutton, gives an award to the worst published sentence, and each year, a truly terrible sentence wins. The following is one such sentence (and yes, it's *all* one sentence):

Indeed dialectical critical realism may be seen under the aspect of Foucauldian strategic reversal—of the unholy trinity of Parmenidean/Platonic/Aristotelean provenance; of the Cartesian-Lockean-Humean-Kantian paradigm, of foundationalisms (in practice, fideistic foundationalisms) and irrationalisms (in practice, capricious exercises of the will-to-power or some other ideologically and/or psycho-somatically buried source) new and old alike; of the primordial failing of western philosophy, ontological monovalence, and its close ally, the epistemic fallacy with its ontic dual; of the analytic problematic laid down by Plato,

which Hegel served only to replicate in his actualist monovalent analytic reinstatement in transfigurative reconciling dialectical connection, while in his hubristic claims for absolute idealism he inaugurated the Comtean, Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean eclipses of reason, replicating the fundamentals of positivism through its transmutation route to the superidealism of a Baudrillard. (*Roy Bhaskar, Plato etc: The Problems of Philosophy and Their Resolution*)

As Dutton puts it, "To ask what this means is to miss the point... [Authors like this one] hope to persuade their readers not by argument but by obscurity... Actual communication has nothing to do with it" (*Denis Dutton 1999:11*).

C. Wright Mills (1959:218-219) argued that this kind of convoluted prose was a result of the academic "pose":

Such lack of intelligibility, I believe, usually has little or nothing to do with the complexity of subject matter, and nothing at all with profundity of thought. It has to do almost entirely with certain confusions of the academic writer about his own status... [Because the academic writer in America] feels his own lack of public position, he often puts the claim for his own status before his claim for the attention of the reader to what he is saying... To overcome the academic prose you have first to overcome the academic pose.

To overcome the academic pose, scholars should stop trying to show how complex our ideas are in a vain attempt to show how important we are. Instead, we should get serious about communication, which means we should get serious about revision. For years, my own revision "system" consisted of reading my prose again and again and working to make it "sound better." Using this system, I managed to spend up to 100 hours writing one page. This was not a revision system—it was a non-system.

Even if you don't have a good revision system, it will be easy for you to learn to use one because, as a scholar, you have already done a great deal of writing and learned much about writing well.

To get serious about revision you should bear in mind that papers should be well written at three main levels, and each level serves a different function (*Rankin 2001:100*). At the macro level, the paper should communicate its purpose clearly to its audience. The macro level is the most important level, which is why you post your thesis on the wall and write to it. At the mid level, paragraphs should be consistent in structure and length and, most important, the organization should be clear both within and between paragraphs. At the sentence level, sentences should be well worded and grammatically correct. As long as there is still work to be done at the paper or paragraph level, do not allow yourself to take time to improve prose at the sentence level. The sentence level is the least important level and should be revised last.²

At the mid level, paragraphs should be consistent in structure and length because such paragraphs suggest to the reader that the writer is in charge and leading the reader confidently through what is known (*Baker 1984:52*). The length of paragraphs in scholarly work should be about half a page

² Just as we should revise at the sentence level last when we write, we should put the least emphasis on the sentence level when we grade. To do this, we should "put our pens in our pockets" while we read student papers and then write students one main response, aimed at the macro level, when we are done reading (*Greg Colomb from a workshop on grading*). If the micro level paper requires work, you might correct one paragraph of the paper carefully, sentence by sentence, and caution the student to watch for these same kinds of errors throughout the paper. If your university has a writing center, you might also refer the student to the writing center for help.

Revising

long on a double-spaced page—or “square.” The expected length varies somewhat by discipline. Paragraphs are longest in the humanities, shortest in the sciences, and somewhere in between in the social sciences. In any discipline, paragraphs should not vary much in length and be “long enough to complete a thought, short enough to give the reader some visible hope of relief, and middling enough not to look odd alongside its fellows” (*McCloskey, 1985:205*).

A paragraph should also be consistent in structure; that is, it should complete three functions in order. First, the paragraph should open with a transition. The transition can be as short as a word or a phrase that was used in the previous paragraph—or as long as a sentence or even two or three (*Williams and Colomb 1990:101*). Second, the transition should be followed by a topic or key sentence. Third, the rest of the paragraph should provide support or evidence for the idea in the key sentence. As you revise, you should check each paragraph against this template.

— Step 6 — Organize around key sentences

Readers expect nonfiction to have one point per paragraph. Ideally, the point of the paragraph should be suggested in one sentence, a key or topic sentence, located early in the paragraph and supported by the rest of the paragraph. A key sentence is to a paragraph like a street sign is to a street: It orients the readers and helps them navigate. A key sentence is much like a topic sentence: It announces the topic of the paragraph (*Williams and Colomb 1990:97–105*). A key sentence must be broad enough to “cover” everything in the paragraph but not so broad that it raises issues that are not addressed in the paragraph. After you think you have located the key sentence, ask yourself the (key) question: “Is the rest of the paragraph about the idea in the key sentence?” Ideally, the key sentence should announce the topic simply and with little detail; it should announce the topic without trying to prove the point—the rest of the paragraph serves that function. The key sentence should also be short and memorable. The ideal key sentence should include key words in its subject; that is, if the topic of the paragraph is “Napoleon,” then “Napoleon” should appear as the subject of the key sentence, rather than “he.”

A key sentence differs from what many people were taught about topic sentences because a key sentence need not be the first sentence in a paragraph (*Williams and Colomb 1990:90, 101*). The later the key sentence appears in a paragraph, the longer the paragraph tends to be. When writers take longer to

Revising

warm up to the key sentence, they also take longer to explain, support, and qualify it (*Williams and Colomb 1990:92-93*). How long writers take to warm up is mostly a matter of tradition and different disciplines have different traditions. In most scientific disciplines, key sentences tend to be the first sentence in each paragraph. Key sentences are often the second sentence in the social sciences and sometimes even the third sentence in the humanities. In all fields, key sentences can be the last sentence in the paragraph, but then they require anticipatory key sentences that are placed early in the paragraph and provide a foreshadowing of what the key sentence is to be. It is usually easier to just state the key sentence early in the paragraph.

Find the key sentence as you read the following paragraph: Once you have made your choice, read the explanation that follows.

Example. "We learn rules for actions better when those rules are structured, whether we learn by practicing them, by watching a teacher demonstrate them, or by listening to a teacher explain them. But do we learn better from a demonstration or an explanation? We are likely to learn more when we watch a demonstration if our language skills are so weak that we cannot understand words easily, or if the teacher cannot verbalize the rules. We are also likely to learn more from watching a demonstration when we must quickly coordinate intricate actions such as learning to ride a bicycle, but the explanation for them is too cumbersome. Finally, we are likely to learn more from a demonstration if the action is difficult or unfamiliar and the teacher lectures about it at length. On the other hand, we will learn an action better from an explanation if we can deftly translate explanations into actions and then store the information." (*Williams and Colomb 1990:87*)

Explanation. The second sentence is key: "But do we learn better from a demonstration or from an explanation?" Everything after

Organize around key sentences

this key question addresses the issue: In which situations do we learn better, from a demonstration or an explanation? Most of the examples show when we learn more from demonstrations but the last sentence shows when we learn more from explanations.

Now, pause here to get more experience with finding key sentences in other sample paragraphs before proceeding further. Appendix B provides a series of the examples from a variety of fields with increasing levels of difficulties—and each example has an answer. The advantage of these examples is that the answers appear right after the examples. In contrast, you will spend the rest of your life as a writer wrestling with examples from your own prose when the answers are less than clear. Therefore, it is advantageous to work through these examples, which provide the one time you will actually have answers to your questions.

[Turn to Appendix B.]

Next, practice finding key sentences in your own paragraphs. Don't expect your reader to take time to "piece together" a key sentence from phrases in different sentences. Do that for your reader. If you can't find your key sentence immediately, your reader won't be able to find it at all (*Booth, Colomb and Williams 2003:213*). In this case, write a simple sentence that expresses your topic and place it early in the paragraph. Then, revise your paragraph around it.

Just as every paragraph needs a key sentence to be coherent, every paper and every section of a paper must have one. Your paper already has a key sentence: It's the thesis you posted on the wall. So, too, with every section of your paper. Therefore, make sure the introduction, the literature review, the methods section, and every other section has a key sentence (*Booth, Colomb and Williams 2003:210*). Sometimes smaller sections of a paper—two

Revising

or more closely related paragraphs—will also require a key sentence. Because sections have their own key sentences, one sentence might serve as key for the section while another serves as key for a paragraph. For example, the first two sentences of a paragraph might say, “Next we will compare the nutritional value of the apple and the orange. First, consider the orange.” In this paragraph, the first sentence is probably working as a key sentence for the next two paragraphs, but the second sentence is working as a key sentence for the paragraph on oranges. The only time a paragraph can legitimately contain two key sentences is when key sentences serve different functions. Any other time that a single paragraph has two key sentences, one idea should be dropped or two paragraphs should be written.

Step 7 — Use key sentences as an after-the-fact outline

You have identified a key sentence in each paragraph as a way of checking the internal organization of the paragraph. To examine the organization *between* paragraphs, list your key sentences—and headings—so they provide an after-the-fact outline (*Booth, Colomb and Williams 2003:213 and 188*).³ To do this, use the “hidden text” function on your word processor to hide everything but the key sentences and the headings (see Appendix C for details). Now, read just the list of sentences and question yourself about purpose and organization:

- How could the key sentences better communicate the purpose (thesis) of the paper to the intended audience?
- How could the key sentences be better organized? More logical? More coherent?

Once you have viewed your sentences as an after-the-fact outline a few times you, will see how valuable it is to view your prose through this new lens. You will discover there is no point in waiting to view your headings and key sentences until you have a full draft of a writing project. Instead, you will find it useful to begin your writing session each day by viewing only the headings and key sentences of the section you worked on the previous day.

3 Of course, you could also write your key sentences first, and then compose your paragraphs around them. Even if you compose your paragraphs this way, you will want to pull your final key sentences out of your prose once you have written it to see the after-the-fact outline.

Revising

Your after-the-fact outline will also help you to draft your abstract better and more quickly than before. To begin, start by reading all the key sentences and deleting the ones that don't belong in the abstract. Repeat that process until you have 5–7 sentences remaining. Then, try weaving the sentences together. When you write an abstract this way, you may find that you can write a better abstract in an hour than you could previously write in a day. What has happened is that, by organizing your paragraphs around key sentences, you have learned a system of revision that helps you see the forest and not just the trees. You can explain your purpose clearly to your audience because you are clearer about your purpose. When you write your abstract, you don't have to struggle to find your key points because they are already isolated from the rest of the text.

Although key sentences may seem like a lot of work, the work pays off handsomely for you—and for your readers. Key sentences within each paragraph serve as an outline of the paper—an outline that is accessible to the reader. Key sentences can benefit the reader even more explicitly if the writer is required to share the outline version of the paper with the reader. This is most useful to readers who are faced with reading much (inexpert) prose quickly, as teachers often are. As a teacher, you may want to capitalize on this by requiring your students to put their after-the-fact outlines on the cover page of each paper they submit. With this requirement, you will see an improvement in their writing and in the speed and accuracy of your grading. The outline immediately shows you the purpose of each student's paper and reveals problems with logic and coherence. This helps you because reading just each student's

Use key sentences as an after-the-fact outline

outline allows you to tentatively stack the papers into "A," "B" and "C" piles quickly and well by reading only the cover pages. Then you can read the whole pile of "A" papers to make sure that all the papers in that stack deserve the same grade. For more information about this and other techniques to improve student writing and your grading, contact me at tgray@nmsu.edu about the most recent version of my article, which includes instructions that help students understand how to write with key sentences, "Our Students Can Too Write—And We Can Show Them How."

Similarly, when you work with graduate students writing master's theses or dissertations, you may want to require the students to give you an after-the-fact outline of their working manuscripts. When I work with these students for a few minutes each week, I read only their outline until it is in good enough shape to communicate the purpose of the manuscript logically and coherently. It is only then that I turn my attention to the manuscript that the outline represents. I find that this approach saves me hours (days!) because it helps me focus on the larger questions. For example, what is the purpose of the manuscript and how does each paragraph contribute to it? Is the organization both logical and coherent? Students tell me that the approach seems artificial at first, but over time they see the benefit because they observe that their own writing is focused and flourishing, but their peers are floundering.